

The Mesoamerica Center

by PAOLA BUECHÉ

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TUCKED AWAY ON THE first floor of the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin is an interdisciplinary center dedicated to facilitating knowledge, learning, and understanding about the ancient

indigenous cultures and peoples of present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador: The Mesoamerica Center.

Directed by David Stuart, the Linda and David Schele Professor of Mesoamerican Art, the Mesoamerica Center focuses primarily on the integrated study of the arts, languages, and archaeology of Mesoamerican indigenous cultures. In addition to acting as a hub for scholars, students, and the general public, the Mesoamerica Center oversees Casa Herrera, a facility in the heart of the city of Antigua, Guatemala, and the Maya Meetings, a premier academic conference and symposium on Mesoamerican culture.

Casa Herrera, a colonial house in the center of Antigua, has dramatically changed the reach of the Mesoamerica Center. The new research, conference, and teaching facility is operated year-round by the Department of Art and Art History at UT Austin in collaboration with the Fundación Pantaleón. This nonprofit organization was founded in 1992 with a mission to support education, health, and environmental projects that offer an opportunity to improve the level and quality of life in Guatemala.

During 2011, the Mesoamerica Center oversaw its inaugural semester abroad. Casa Herrera's mission of bringing interrelated disciplines together to study pre-Columbian art, archaeology, history, and culture comes alive during the semester abroad. Studying abroad at Casa Herrera is a unique experience. Dr. Stuart, who served as the faculty leader during the first semester, explains the appeal of the program: "Antigua is a jewel, regarded by many as one of the most beautiful towns in the Americas. The Casa Herrera is the base of our operations, with classroom space and study areas. It's a beautiful example of Spanish colonial architecture, and it's been fully renovated with all modern amenities. The students stay with local host families in Antigua, sharing meals with them and interacting almost as family members. That



David Stuart, Director of the Mesoamerica Center.

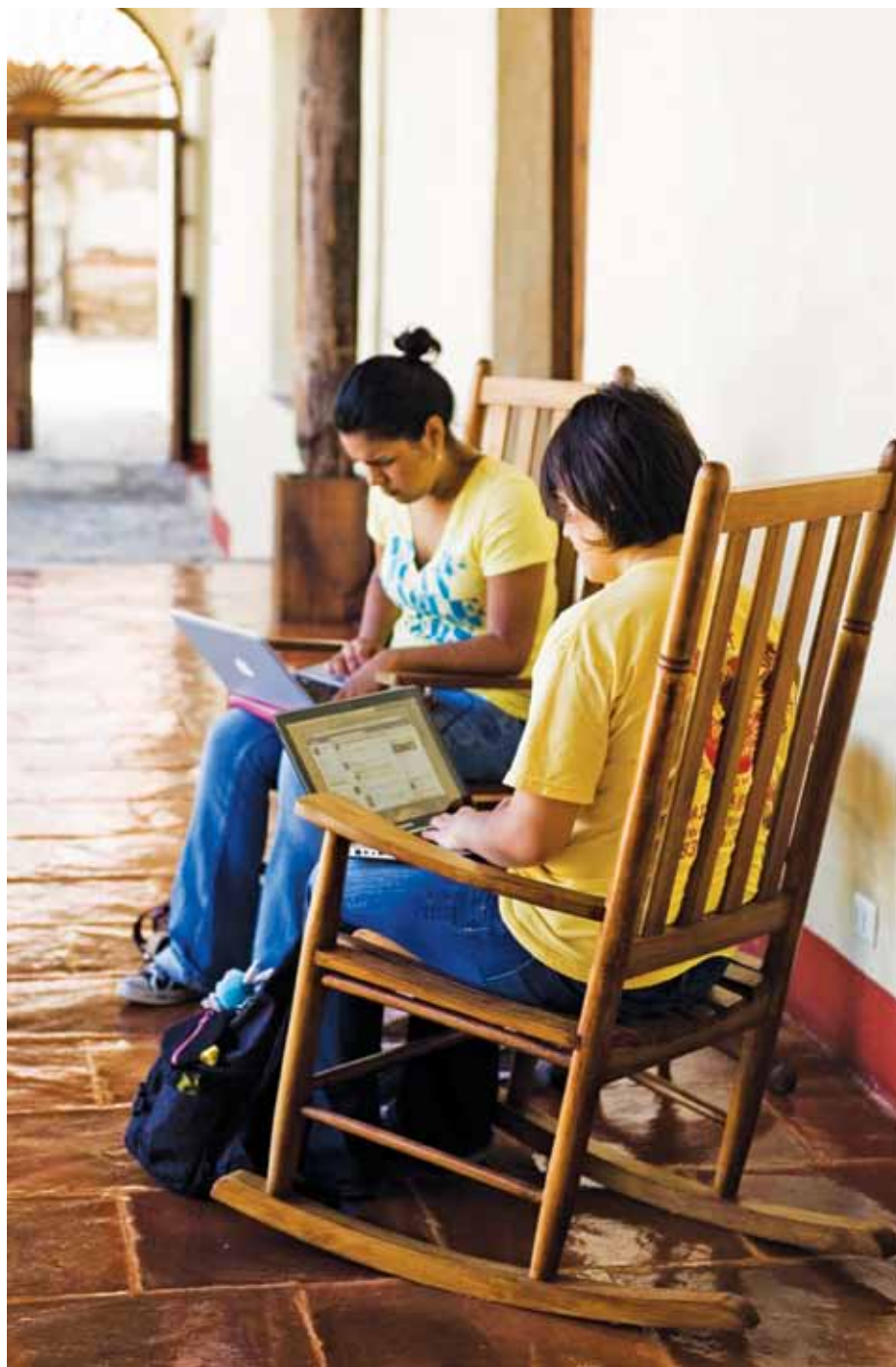
kind of intense personal experience of another country and culture will allow the students to expand their horizons and learn in ways far deeper and richer than many other study abroad offerings offered at U.S. universities.”

As one of the most important cultural and artistic centers in Central America, Antigua has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site and draws a large number of international visitors and students every year. Students take part in learning a broad range of subjects, along with immersion in the Guatemalan Spanish and Maya language and culture. Beginning with spring 2013, the semester-long Study Abroad program will take place at Casa Herrera annually.

This is an exciting time for Maya studies. The 2012 phenomenon has highlighted public awareness, and recent excavations in projects in Guatemala and Mexico have yielded new discoveries that are adding to our knowledge about the ancient Maya. In 2011 a team of archaeologists uncovered a small room at the Maya site of Xultun in northern Guatemala. Barely missed by a looters trench, the walls and ceiling still retain a rare example of original painting. This find is especially significant; depicted on the wall are several human figures and hieroglyphic writing. Stuart, who works with the Xultun project and deciphered the glyphs, says, “This is tremendously exciting,” noting that the columns of numbers interspersed with glyphs inside circles is “the kind of thing that only appears in one place—the Dresden Codex [one of the few remaining Maya manuscripts].”

Many of the recent new archaeological findings in the Maya area will be the center of attention at the 2013 Maya Meetings. Titled *The Art of Maya Architecture: Cosmology and Dynasty in the Built Environment*, they will take place January 15–18, 2013, at UT Austin.

The annual Maya Meetings bring together scholars and interested individuals to study and explore the richness of ancient Maya art, archaeology, and writing. The celebrated Mayanist Linda Schele, a Professor of Art and Art History at UT Austin until her untimely death in 1998, founded the conference in 1977, then known as the Maya Hieroglyphic Workshops. Since their inception, the Maya Meetings have featured lectures, forums, and research workshops, many geared toward the study and learning of ancient Maya



Students study on the veranda of Casa Herrera.

hieroglyphs. More than thirty years later, the meetings continue to feature cutting-edge scholarly gatherings on Maya studies.

In 2010 the Maya Meetings were held for the first time at Casa Herrera. The topic for the first conference away from Austin was *Early Maya Iconography and Script*. Many of the lectures focused on new research being

carried out right in the “backyard” of the conference, and a number of participants who are unable to travel to the United States were able to participate in the hieroglyph workshops and conference.

In 2011 the Maya Meetings returned to Austin to tackle the problem of Maya time. *2012: Time and Prophecy in Mesoamerica*

brought in scholars to talk about the influence of the Maya calendar and time itself on ritual and daily life. Lectures ranged from topics on the mechanics of the Maya calendar to “New Age” beliefs about 2012.

The 2012 Maya Meetings returned to Casa Herrera in Antigua. *Beyond the Glyph: Maya Inscriptions as Literature* was the first international conference devoted to the topic of ancient Maya literature. Presenters and attendees grappled with the question of how to study deciphered hieroglyphic writing as true texts. Can different genres of writing be identified? How did scribes design their texts rhetorically and visually to convey and highlight information? Questions such as these were addressed not only by specialists in ancient Maya writing, but scholars of contemporary Maya literature as well.

The Mesoamerica Center will continue to make Antigua a routine location for Maya Meeting conferences, alternating each year with our traditional venue on the UT Austin campus.

The Mesoamerica Center in Austin is equally active throughout the year. On any given day, you can find David Stuart diligently deciphering the latest hieroglyphic discoveries or Julia Guernsey decoding the enigmatic “potbelly” sculptures that were erected at dozens of sites across Mesoamerica during the Preclassic period. The Mesoamerica Center affiliated faculty engage in research on a variety of topics ranging from ancient to modern Maya studies.

Julia Guernsey is an Associate Professor from the Department of Art and Art History and affiliated faculty of the Mesoamerica Center. Guernsey’s research and publications focus on the Middle and Late Preclassic periods in ancient Mesoamerica, in particular on sculptural expressions of rulership during this time. Her latest book, *Sculpture and Social Dynamics in Preclassic Mesoamerica* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), examines the functions of sculpture during this period and its significance in statements of social identity. She recently received the 2012 Department of Art and Art History Teaching Excellence Award.

David Stuart’s interests in the traditional cultures of Mesoamerica are wide-ranging, but his primary research focus is the archaeology and epigraphy of ancient Maya civilization. His early work on the decipherment of Maya

hieroglyphs led to a MacArthur Fellowship in 1984, the youngest recipient of the “genius” award. His publication *Ten Phonetic Syllables* (1987) laid much of the groundwork for the now-accepted methodology of decipherment.

Stuart’s latest book, *The Order of Days* (Random House, 2012), is a popular account of Ancient Maya calendars and cosmology. Stuart also has discussed the recent 2012 phenomenon on his own blog (<http://decipherment.wordpress.com>). Dispelling the myths surrounding this date, he explains that the Maya calendar does not end in 2012: “What will happen is a recurrence, an anniversary of sorts, of a key mythological date in the distant past. The Maya wrote this as 13.0.0.0.0 in their ‘Long Count’ calendar (an abbreviation of a much bigger number), which fell on August 11, 3114 BC. This ‘creation date’ was not the beginning of everything, however. Maya mythological texts tell us that plenty was happening long, long before this starting point of the current era.

On December 21, 2012 (some say December 23) we come again to a numerological recurrence of 13.0.0.0.0. The Long Count calendar continues well beyond this date, too. In fact, the numerology of the calendar demands that there will be other similar recurrences of this same date in the far distant future, on a scale of octillions of years. The scale of Maya time reckoning dwarfs anything in our own cosmology by many orders of magnitude.”

The mission of the Mesoamerica Center consists of fostering communication among many academic units on campus, highlighting the interdisciplinary strengths of faculty and students at UT Austin. “We’re trying to dispel some of the mystery, and show the ancient and modern Maya as real people with a real history and identity in today’s world,” says Stuart. “The ancient Maya did not disappear—they transformed.” ☀

Paola Bueché is senior program coordinator for the Mesoamerica Center.



Julia Guernsey lectures at the 2012 Maya Meetings held at Casa Herrera.